

DECEMBER 93/JANUARY 94
FOREWORD
LITERATURE
NEWSLETTER
EAST MIDLANDS ARTS

ON BONNEFOY

ON THE MOTION AND IMMOBILITY OF DOUVE BY YVES BONNEFOY -
TRANSLATED BY GALWAY KINNELL
REVIEWED FOR *FOREWORD* BY CHARLES MANSFIELD

Bloodaxe Books 1992 (ISBN 1 85244 1322)

'Rather ivy, you would say, 'the way it clings to the stones of this night:... face
without roots... Rather this wind...' Bonnefoy

With these narrative artefacts, fragmented and unfinished, Yves Bonnefoy begins to show us a world without conclusion. His act of defiance towards the narrative pressures inherent in both the French and English languages sets up a tension, even a violence in this book of poems. Ostensibly, the volume is about a female lover, Douve. Douve, though, is the French word for a moat, that uncrossable body which separates us from safety and from danger. With this undercurrent at work we read the poems as if they are about the divide between us and death as much as they are about the divide between us and the untouchable reality of text. This is dangerous writing, fulfilling Derrida's "fatal necessity" by making us substitute the textual sign for reality.

Often Bonnefoy echoes the traditions of French poetry by using twelve syllable classical alexandrines which affect the French ear as strongly as the rhythm of a Shakespearean line affects ours. In "True Name" the first lines translates well into a kind of anglo-alexandrine "I will name wilderness the castle which you were / Night your voice, absence your face," Adding further patina, Bonnefoy suddenly uses the past historic sense "tu fus", "thou wert" in this line. This evocation of a rich, echoing, ancient text is a challenge I've worked with. In 'Setaside', for example, Poetry Nottingham (Autumn 92)*, I use the pentameter much as Bonnefoy uses the alexandrine, to remind the reader that this is poetry with, what Eagleton describes as, deliberate poetic tactics and intentions: "And now I remember how he stands / These last days: in silence, with resting hands, / And leaves the ground to hunch it s white boned back / Naked from the soil."

Bonnefoy's project makes a complex image of the earth, the body and the text. Concern with the body and it s relationship with the earth fills contemporary culture, in Douve the relationship is seen as a consummation "The body purified, that shining fate / Buried in the earth of words, / And the most basic marriage is accomplished." in 'True Body'. It is the poet's project, that of the act of knowing and naming, which Douve speaks of and accomplishes. Since structuralism tore away the humanist fallacy that a poem is a transcript of a living voice we have been forced to face the

text directly, to come to terms with what it means to us as readers. Bonnefoy offers no clues. Douve is hard work. We have to engage with the text. Kinnell has translated it but we have to translate it for ourselves again and again since it is only our own body that we can truly experience. In 'Theatre XVIII' he stirs up this existential position with the line: "that blood which springs and flourishes there where the poem is torn"; then he tears the poem before you and, at last addresses you directly.

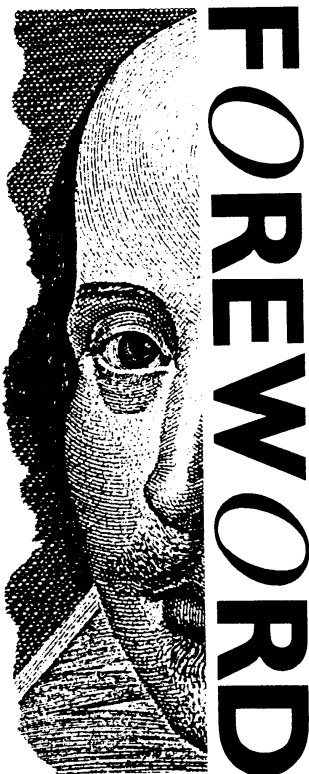
Bonnefoy (b.1923) is Professor of Poetic Function at the Collège de France so his intellectual position makes any of his creative output valuable for other writers. I feel this particularly because of his statement that "poetry and new criticism are not made to contradict each other". If we are to understand and take part in the creation of a poetic voice which is European we must be open to the strands of continental philosophy which now inform serious literary writing. It's always been the poet's task to define new places, the new Europe is an exciting place to name.

CHARLES MANSFIELD

* Work Cited

Mansfield, Charles (1992) 'Setaside' in Claire Piggott (ed) *Poetry Nottingham*, Autumn Volume 64, Number 3, page 20, Nottingham, Poetry Society
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BLOODAXE CONTEMPORARY FRENCH POETS: 1

YVES BONNEFOY

**On the Motion and
Immobility of Douve**



**Du mouvement et
de l'immobilité de Douve**

Translated by
GALWAY KINNELL

Introduction by
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FRENCH-ENGLISH BILINGUAL EDITION

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